

It was another clear, summer night in Milton, Fla.—a perfect evening for a few of my last flights in the HTs. I had just finished RIs and was finally an instrument-rated pilot. All that stood between me and my wings were a couple of helicopter-tactics flights. After the drudgery of RIs, HTACs were a welcome relief, and as close to fun as the training command gets. I already had completed several of them and was looking forward to another great flight.

The afternoon had been standard. I'd gone to the gym, eaten some dinner and showed up about an hour before my brief time. The SDO informed me that I was going to brief in the aircraft after a hot-seat. I had plenty of time to study, do a weight-and-balance, and watch the sunset.

My aircraft called inbound. I went to pick up my gear and wait in the crew-change area. After a standard swap, my instructor and I went through the brief items and did the required NATOPS and

ORM briefs. It was the IP's third go of the day, and the air conditioner was down, but he seemed ready to go.

HTAC-4 is normally a short flight: a five-minute hop over to Santa Rosa OLF for some night maneuvers and then back to South Whiting for a few show-and-tell autos. The night ops at Santa Rosa went great. I was flying well, and the IP and I discussed my upcoming selection while we were in the pattern. We finished up what we needed to do and headed back home for the night autos.

As usual, the pattern was crowded with people trying to finish up their flights before the field closed for the night. My IP took the controls as we entered the downwind. He talked about the procedures he was about to demonstrate and some techniques to use when I did it next time around. He pointed out some common student mistakes and how a power-recovery auto might give you a different sight picture at night.

# One Sandbag, No Waiting

*by Ltjg. Dan Keeler*



We turned onto a left base and set up for a standard, 90-degree entry. He entered without any problems, and I checked his airspeed, Nr and ball as we descended. They looked good. As I turned to watch the night rushing by, we approached our flare altitude. “Flare, twist grip, twist grip, twist grip full open,” I heard as I continued to look outside. I looked back in as we got ready to recover.

Something didn’t feel right. “Push and pull,” he said and kept pulling and pulling and pulling the collective. Hmmm... no engine response, followed by a low-rpm light and horn.

“Oh, crap,” I thought. “This is going to hurt.”

“Twist grip!” I yelled but it was too little, too late. He tried a low-rpm recovery to no avail.

We slammed into the ground, bounced and spun down the runway. Everything does move in slow motion during an accident. It seemed like an eternity before we came to a stop. Tower called, “Can you clear the runway?” After a quick visual inspection, we decided that wasn’t a good idea.

The skids were spread completely, our chin bubble broken, the tail boom was bent, and we had no idea how badly the transmission was damaged. We shut down the aircraft and were greeted by what looked like every fire truck and ambulance in Milton. It wasn’t how I had expected to end my evening.

My instructor immediately said it wasn’t my fault, but I don’t think he should get all the blame. I had taken all that ACT training, tossed it out the window and had acted like a 180-pound sandbag along for the ride. He thought he forgot to close the twist grip on entry. I didn’t confirm it. It’s hard to do a power-recovery auto without the engine on line. I assumed that senior pilots don’t make mistakes. I also spent too much time twiddling my thumbs in the left seat and not enough time backing up my pilot in the right seat. 🦅

Ltjg. Keeler was a replacement pilot at HC-3 when he wrote this article.



Photo-composite by Allan Amen